

# NEWSRELEASE

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### Victims find answers about crimes by meeting with offenders

Victims of violent crimes in Montana are finding answers to their questions about the offenses committed against them by meeting face-to-face with convicted felons under Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) supervision.

The DOC has conducted these "victim-offender dialogues" in two murder cases and two felony assaults since the program began in 2006, according to Sally Hilander, the DOC victim information specialist. The program does not include juvenile offenders.

Dialogues involving two deliberate homicides and an aggravated assault have occurred in state prison with the approval of the warden and security staff. The fourth dialogue, involving felony assault against children, occurred at a probation office. Victims of negligent homicide (drunken driving death) and incest also have initiated dialogues. Participants must be adults, but parents or guardians can participate on their children's behalf.

Victims of felony offenses may initiate the dialogue process by contacting Hilander or a victim information officer in any DOC program or facility. Offender participation is voluntary.

A trained volunteer facilitator meets several times with the victim and offender separately. This critical preparation can take up to a year, but it ensures that the dialogue will not be harmful to either party. Either party can opt out at any time.

"The dialogue is tough for everyone, but this is a respectful process in which no one is abused verbally or physically," Hilander said.

She encourages victims of felony crimes to consider meeting with the offender if they have unanswered questions or are finding it difficult to move forward in their lives.

"The decision to initiate a victim-offender dialogue begins a very personal journey toward healing from the trauma of felony crime, whether the victim was injured directly or experienced the injury or death of a loved one," Hilander said.

At his point, DOC does not allow victim-offender dialogue in domestic violence and stalking cases. Participating offenders receive no tangible benefits, but most of them find the process helpful because it may be the first time they confront, face-to-face, the harm they have caused others, Hilander said. The process requires offenders to take responsibility for their crime, and gives them an opportunity to

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apologize and help their victims by answering questions. National statistics indicate that offenders who participate in such dialogue with their victims are less likely to commit more crimes, she said.

Victim-offender dialogue is one type of restorative justice, a criminal justice concept that focuses on offender accountability and restitution, as well as healing for victims and communities. The department also has victim-impact panels and classes for offenders in some of its programs. In addition, the DOC collects more than \$2 million in court-ordered victim restitution every year.

For more information about victim-offender dialogue and other restorative justice programs at DOC, call Hilander at (406) 444-7461 or write to Victim Information Specialist, Montana Department of Corrections, P.O. Box 201301, Helena, MT 59620-1301.

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